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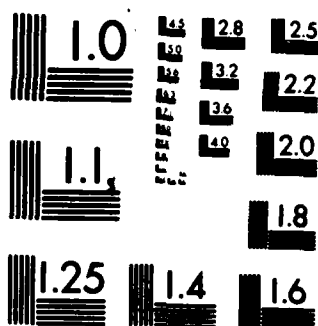
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THE ROLE OF SOCIAL SUPPORT
IN ORGANIZATIONAL SOCIALIZATION

Cynthia D. Fisher

May, 1983

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The Role of Social Support in Organizational Socialization¹

Organizational socialization is the complex process by which individuals outside the organization become fully adjusted insiders. Several "stage" models of the socialization process have been proposed, but all encompass three broad steps (c.f. Feldman, 1981; Graen, 1976; Van Maanen, 1975). The first of these is anticipatory socialization, which consists of information gathering and expectation development by the newcomer which occurs prior to organizational entry. The next step is entering the organization and discovering what the new job and work setting are really like. Often expectations are disconfirmed at this time, and the newcomer experiences "surprise" (Louis, 1980a), or "reality shock" (Kotter, 1973). The entry phase of socialization can be quite stressful, as newcomers are unclear about what they are supposed to do and may be uncertain of their ability to cope with the organization's demands. The final step in socialization is for the individual to adjust fairly well to organizational reality, by learning both how to do the job and how to function in the social/cultural environment in the organization. Outcomes of this adjustment phase are thought to be job satisfaction, organizational commitment, intention to remain with the organization, acceptable performance, and the like (Van Maanen, 1975; Feldman, 1976, 1981). A similar but sometimes longer process occurs in entering and becoming socialized in an occupation or profession.

Other organization members play a key role in socializing newcomers. Old members serve as role senders and also as rich sources of information on how to "make sense" of organizational reality (Louis, 1980b). For instance, Van Maanen (1976, p. 90) says that peers help newcomers "interpret the role demands dictated by the organization" and "cushion the impact of the 'reality shock' accompanying the individual's encounter with the organization". Louis (1980c) asked recent MBA graduates which people or events were most helpful in becoming ad-

justed to their new jobs. Frequent contact with more senior peers and having a buddy or mentor relationship were rated as most helpful, closely followed by frequent contact with one's supervisor. Formal training programs were considered much less facilitative of adjustment. Thus, newcomers who lack helpful contact with insiders are expected to have a harder time adjusting to the organization (Louis, 1980b).

This view of organizational socialization and the critical role of other insiders fits well with some of the recent research on the importance of social support in coping with stressful experiences. The relevant literature will be briefly described, and then specific predictions regarding the effects of social support on early adjustment to the organization will be made.

Stress, Social Support, and Outcomes

Broadly, this literature states that stress, in any form (including work-related problems, financial problems, family tragedies, major changes in life style, etc.) tends to lead to negative mental and physical outcomes (such as anxiety, depression, coronary heart disease, etc.) and that social support plays a role in determining the levels and/or interrelationships of these variables. Social support is conceptualized as the number and quality of friendships or caring relationships which provide either emotional reassurance, needed information, or instrumental aid in dealing with stressful situations. Support can come from a variety of sources, including family members, friends, organizations like churches and clubs, co-workers, and superiors at work.

Social support is hypothesized to have three kinds of impacts on stress and subsequent outcomes (House, 1981). First, it may have a "main effect" on outcomes, such that individuals who experience great social support are less depressed, more healthy, and so on (Turner, 1981; Lin, Simeone, Ensel, and Kuo, 1979). Second, it may have a main effect on perceived stress, such that in the

presence of support, environmental stressors are either not perceived, or are objectively reduced through the instrumental aid of the supporter. Finally, there may be a moderating effect, such that stress does not cause negative outcomes if social support is present, but does if social support is absent. That is, social support may "buffer" the otherwise harmful effects of stress on physical and mental health. This last prediction has received very mixed support (c.f. LaRocco, House, and French, 1980; Williams, Ware, and Donald, 1981).

Most of the studies investigating these relationships have considered general life stress, social support from a variety of non-work sources, and general physical and mental health outcomes. Fewer studies have looked specifically at job stress, social support at work, and work-related outcomes, though similar relationships would be expected to appear in the work setting (La Rocca et al., 1980). The main effects of stress on outcomes, social support on outcomes, social support on stress, and the possible interactive effects of social support and stress on outcomes at work will be discussed in turn below.

First, there is evidence that stress has a main effect on outcomes at work. Many researchers have found that role conflict and ambiguity stress have a negative effect on job satisfaction, involvement, and organizational commitment (c.f. Fisher and Gitelson, 1983; Van Sell, Brief, and Schuler, 1981). Similarly, the stress of unmet expectations among organizational newcomers is associated with the outcomes of dissatisfaction and turnover (Horner, 1979; Wanous, 1980; Youngberg, 1963).

The evidence for the main effects of social support on outcomes at work has been fairly consistent. Social support from the superior and co-workers is usually associated with outcomes such as job satisfaction, involvement, and intent to remain on the job (LaRocco, et al. 1980; LaRocco and Jones, 1978; Abdel-Halim, 1982). However, causality in these relationships is unclear. One

view is that having supportive relationships with others at work makes the work environment more pleasant and rewarding, hence the higher satisfaction and lower turnover. Another view is that evidence that a newcomer is successfully adjusting to the job may lead to acceptance and support from co-workers and superiors. That is, the newcomer must show signs of commitment, satisfaction, and performance potential in order to be accepted and receive support from other insiders. Both of these explanations suggest a positive relationship between support and favorable outcomes. Still another view, which predicts a negative relationship, is that social support is mobilized and displayed only when an individual is showing signs of needing it, such as being dissatisfied or preparing to quit (LaRocco et al. 1980; Thoits, 1982). In short, main effects of social support are usually found but the explanation for them is not at all clear.

Evidence that social support has a main effect on stress is slightly weaker. In the general life stress literature, this relationship is very low, since it is unlikely that social support could prevent a stressful event such as the death of a loved one. In the work setting, some aspects of job stress may also be unaffected by social support. For instance, the job of air traffic controller is probably very stressful, regardless of whether or not the supervisor is supportive. Abdel-Halim (1982) suggests that support can be a source of stress in itself, in that close relationships with others at work may increase felt pressure and responsibility to those others. However, most studies report weak to moderate negative relationships between social support and perceived stress (LaRocco, et al., 1980). This seems quite reasonable. For instance, having helpful, informative co-workers or superiors could help prevent stresses like role ambiguity or overload from ever occurring.

Theoretically, social support is expected to buffer the relationship between stress and negative outcomes by "facilitating efforts at coping and de-

fense" when stress is high (House, 1981, p.38). Whether or not social support actually has this buffering effect is a question with important implications for the intentional provision of support. If there is no buffering effect, then support is equally helpful at all levels of stress, and (if main effects warrant) should be provided to all. However, if buffering occurs as predicted, then it becomes important to provide support only when individuals are subjected to particularly high stress levels (House, 1981).

Buffering or moderating effects of social support between work stress and outcomes have been reported in about half of the published studies. Blau (1981), LaRocco et al., (1980), and LaRocco and Jones (1978) report essentially no buffering effects of social support on work related outcomes. On the other hand, Kaufmann and Beehr (1982) and Abdel-Halim (1982) did find buffering effects. Specifically, Abdel-Halim (1982) found that under high support, role conflict and ambiguity stress did not reduce (and in some cases actually increased) job involvement and intrinsic satisfaction, while under low support, role stresses were negatively related to satisfaction and involvement. These moderating effects are exactly as predicted. However, Abdel-Halim's results for one outcome, job anxiety, and all Kaufmann and Beehr's (1982) buffered results were opposite to what was predicted. High support in these cases strengthened relationships between stress and negative outcomes.

Adjustment to Work, Stress, and Social Support

As mentioned earlier, entering a new job can be fairly stressful. This is particularly true when it is the first job in one's career, or the first job following a major career change. Newcomers in such situations are faced with learning both how to do the job and how to get along in the social environment, and are also quite likely to suffer from unmet expectations, since they have little previous experience on which to base their expectations (Louis, 1980b).

The subjects in this study are in just such a situation. They are new graduates of nursing schools during their first six months on a full-time hospital nursing job. Social support from others would be expected to facilitate adjustment to the job for these new nurses by the three processes outlined above. That is, social support from peers and superiors should directly increase outcomes like job satisfaction, commitment, and so on. The causal direction of this relationship will also be investigated, since alternate explanations of the relationship are tenable, as discussed above. Social support should also reduce perceived stress. In this study, stress is defined as the discrepancy between pre-employment expectations and later job conditions on nine items likely to be quite salient to new nurses. Support from others could reduce discrepancy by improving conditions. For example, one item concerns being able to handle emergencies. In the presence of support (encouragement, instruction, and aid from others), new nurses should actually be able to handle emergencies better than those who do not experience such support. Finally, there is the possibility that support could buffer the effects of stress on adjustment outcomes. The specific prediction is that stress and outcomes will be unrelated under high support and related under low support such that high stress will lead to lower satisfaction, lower commitment, and higher intention to turnover in the absence of support.

No predictions about any differential effects of support from the superior vs support from co-workers will be made, since the results of past studies have been mixed. Both Blau (1981) and Abdel-Halim (1982) found very similar effects for the two sources, while LaRocco et al. (1980) reported that co-worker support was most important and House and Wells (1978) found that only superior support was a significant moderator. However, since nurses have free and frequent access to both co-workers and their immediate superior, there is little reason

to expect differential effects. A final question concerns whether support from both co-worker and superior sources is helpful to a greater extent than support from just one of these sources.

METHOD

Procedure and Subjects

A longitudinal design employing three waves of data collection was used. Subjects were surveyed at the end of their professional training just prior to beginning work on their first job in hospital nursing. They were surveyed again after three months on the job, then again after six months.

Subjects were May, 1981 graduates of diploma, associate, and baccalaureate degree nursing schools in Texas. 720 individuals were included in the pre-employment sample. Of these, 38 questionnaires were undeliverable, 227 people did not respond, and 89 subjects were dropped due to missing data or because they were not planning to go to work immediately after graduation. Thus, the number of usable subjects responding to the pre-employment questionnaire was 366. Only these respondents were sent the second questionnaire, after about three months on the job. 272 (74%) returned the second questionnaire, and only these respondents were sent the final questionnaire after six months. 210 (77%) returned this final questionnaire.

Measures

Stress. Stress was operationalized as the sum of differences between expectations prior to employment and actual experience after employment on nine items thought to be important and potentially stressful for new nurses. Examples are:

"(I expect that) Staffing on the nursing unit is (will be) adequate."

"(I expect that) My nursing school preparation is (will be) quite adequate to perform my job."

"(I expect that) I deal with (will be able to deal with) emergency patient care situations without difficulty."

The nine discrepancy scores were summed to produce a net stress index. This allows overmet expectations (situations better than expected) to counteract undermet ones, and should give a good index of total stress experienced by the new nurses. Coefficient alpha for this scale was .74 when conditions on the job were measured at three months and .75 when conditions were measured at six months.² No subjects reported that conditions were better than expected, but about 26% reported very small discrepancies (total score of 0, 1, or 2) while 27% reported quite high discrepancies (total score from 9 to 20). Thus, there was sufficient range to adequately test all hypotheses involving the stress variable.

Social Support. Previous research has suggested that family and friends are the sources of support most likely to moderate relationships between general life stress and overall physical and psychological indices, while work-related sources of support are more related to job stress and outcomes (Blau, 1981; House, 1981; LaRocco et al., 1980). Thus, only work sources were examined in this study. Seventeen items written to tap two kinds of support (emotional and informational/role clarifying) from two sources (co-workers and superiors). An example of each kind is given below.

Co-worker, emotional: "I feel I can count on my co-workers as friends."

Co-worker, informational: "My co-workers are always willing to give me directions when I am not sure of myself on the job."

Superior, emotional: "My immediate supervisor likes me and cares about me as a person."

Superior, informational: "My immediate supervisor seldom makes suggestions when I am unsure of myself on the job."(R)

A principle factor analysis of the 17 items revealed two significant factors accounting for 84% of the variance. The first factor represents supervisory support, and includes both emotional and informational items. This scale contains seven items and had a coefficient alpha of .85 at three and six months. The second factor represents co-worker emotional support. Only one item intended as informational loaded on this factor, and it concerned co-worker praise for good work. While praise should help reinforce appropriate role behavior, it can also be seen as a form of emotional support. Coefficient alpha for this six item scale was .85 at three and six months. The fact that support source dimensions emerged more clearly than support type dimensions is not surprising. House (1981) also found that employees were able to distinguish among sources of support but not among types of support from the same source.

Adjustment to Work. Six measures of adjustment to work were used. Since these nurses were being socialized not only into a job, but also into a new profession, measures of adjustment to both the job and profession were collected at three and six months.

Job Satisfaction. Three items tapping overall job satisfaction were scattered throughout the questionnaire. This scale had a reliability of .91 at each administration.

Organizational Commitment. This was measured by the 15 item scale developed by Mowday, Steers, and Porter (1979). In this study, the scale had a reliability of .77 at three and six months.

Intent to Leave the Organization. This was measured by a single item, "I definitely plan to quit my job at this hospital in the near future." which was answered on a seven point Likert scale.

Self Rated Performance. Nurses were asked to rate their performance on seven functional aspects of their job, on a six point rating scale with anchors ranging from "still pretty shaky" to "outstanding." Coefficient alpha for this

scale was .90 at both three and six months. No claim is made that this measure accurately taps "true" performance or would correlate with a superior's assessment. However, self perceived task competence does seem to be one important outcome of a successful socialization or adjustment process to a new job (Feldman, 1977; Fisher and Goddard, 1982).

Reported Turnover. Subjects were asked on the six month questionnaire whether they had changed employers since graduating. Only 30 of those who replied had changed. Those who had quit did not supply any other usable information at six months, since they would have been describing a different job than before.

Professional Commitment. This was measured by a five item scale developed by Alutto, Hrebiniak, and Alonso (1971) which asks how likely one would be to leave the nursing profession for more pay, more opportunity to be creative, more status, better colleagues, or a job closer to home. Reliability was .87 at both administrations.

Intention to Leave the Profession. This was measured by one item, similar to the intention to leave the organization item.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Stress - Outcomes

The correlations among the variables appear in Table 1. The simple hypothesis that unmet expectation stress and outcomes are related is supported at both three and six months. All but three of the 13 correlations are significant, and all are in the predicted direction. Stress is positively associated with turnover, intention to leave the organization, and intention to leave the profession. It is negatively correlated with job satisfaction and professional and organizational commitment, and unrelated to self rated performance.

Table 1

Correlations of Social Support and Stress with Stress and
Adjustment Outcomes at Three and Six Months

Three Months ^a			
	Supervisory Support	Co-Worker Emotional Support	Stress
Unmet Expectation Stress ^c	-.18	-.16	----
Overall Job Satisfaction	.41	.48	-.21
Organizational Commitment	.49	.43	-.14
Intention to Leave Organization	-.27	-.29	.15
Reported Turnover	-.13	-.17	.14
Self Rated Performance	.27	.28	0
Professional Commitment	.26	.30	-.07
Intention to Leave Profession	-.19	-.25	.12

Six Months ^b			
	Supervisory Support	Co-Worker Emotional Support	Stress
Unmet Expectation Stress ^c	-.16	-.22	----
Overall Job Satisfaction	.40	.48	-.28
Organizational Commitment	.44	.36	-.27
Intention to Leave Organization	-.28	-.36	.23
Self Rated Performance	.18	.25	-.03
Professional Commitment	.24	.30	-.22
Intention to Leave Profession	-.33	-.32	.20

^aN = 229 Correlations $\geq .11$ are significant, $p < .05$

^bStayers only, N = 163 Correlations $\geq .13$ are significant $p < .05$

^cHigh score means high total discrepancy, high stress

Social Support - Adjustment Outcomes

Social support is also related to adjustment outcomes as predicted. Support from both co-workers and the immediate superior is positively related to satisfaction, performance, and commitment, and negatively related to turnover and intentions to leave the organization and profession (Table 1). Causality could run in either direction for this relationship. The stress literature suggests that social support has the effect of reducing negative outcomes and much of the socialization literature agrees that help from others (agents of socialization) is crucial to adjustment (Louis, 1980c), yet there are hints that full social acceptance at work follows from rather than precedes successful adjustment (Feldman, 1977).

Cross lagged regression, as suggested by Rogosa (1980), was used to assess which causal direction predominated. This method involves predicting each six month outcome from the three month outcome and three month social support, and also predicting six month social support from three month social support and three month outcome. The beta weight for social support in equation one is then compared to the beta weight for the outcome in equation two for each pair of equations. If the first weight is significant and the second is near zero, then one can conclude that social support probably causes adjustment outcomes rather than the reverse.

The results of these analyses appear in Table 2. Many of the betas for predicting later outcomes from earlier social support are significant, while none for the reverse causal direction are significant. Thus, it appears that later adjustment is most likely caused in part by previous social support from co-workers and superiors.

Support from co-workers seems to be about equal in importance to support from superiors, since both produce correlations with outcomes of similar magnitude. Further analyses were undertaken to determine whether support from two

Table 2

Cross Lagged Regression Coefficients for Social Support and Adjustment Outcomes^A

Adjustment Outcome	Outcome ₆ = B ₁ Outcome ₃ + B ₂ SocSup ₃		SocSup ₆ = B ₁ SocSup ₃ + B ₂ Outcome ₃	
	Beta ₂	F	Change in R ²	Beta ₂ F Change in R ²
<u>Adjustment Outcome</u> Overall Job Satisfaction Organizational Commitment Intention to Leave Organization Self Rated Performance Professional Commitment Intention to Leave Profession	Supervisory Support			
	.19	6.05*	.030	.01 .01 0
	.17	5.58*	.025	.09 1.32 .006
	-.17	7.60**	.028	-.05 .52 .002
	.04	.37	.001	-.03 .16 .001
	.07	1.34	.004	-.03 .20 0
	-.17	7.60**	.028	-.09 1.76 .008
Overall Job Satisfaction Organizational Commitment Intention to Leave Organization Self Rated Performance Professional Commitment Intention to Leave Profession	Co-worker Emotional Support			
	.24	7.69**	.040	-.05 .45 .002
	.03	.20	0	-.02 .06 0
	-.07	.90	.004	.00 0 0
	.19	6.05*	.030	-.02 .03 0
	.17	8.04**	.026	.04 .33 .001
	-.21	10.39**	.038	-.08 1.33 .005

N = 157

* p < .05

** p < .01

sources is better (in terms of producing favorable adjustment outcomes) than support from a single source. Both types of support were split into high and low categories, excluding the middle 20-30%, and a two-way analysis of variance was conducted on each outcome at three and six months. Most main effects were significant, and in 12 of the 13 analyses, the mean outcome was most favorable in the high-co-worker, high-supervisor support cell, indicating that two sources of support generally are better than one.

Social Support - Stress

Social support is also related to unmet expectation stress as was predicted -- support is negatively and significantly correlated with stress. These relationships are not extremely strong (-.16 to -.22), but as mentioned earlier, support cannot be expected to totally remove the stressful characteristics of the job. Particularly in this case, where the stress variable is comprised partly of pre-job expectations, support could impact only on perceived conditions, not initial expectations.

Moderating Effects of Social Support

Finally, the buffering hypothesis was tested. Each outcome was predicted by stress, social support, and then stress X social support. A moderating effect exists if the interaction adds significantly to the prediction of the outcome (Zedeck, 1971). Moderator analyses were run for each outcome with each measure of social support at three and again at six months for a total of 26 analyses. Only two interaction terms were significant. Supervisor support X stress added significantly to the prediction of organizational commitment at six months, ($F = 8.73$, $p < .01$, change in $R^2 = .04$), and the interaction with co-worker support had the same effect ($F = 5.61$, $p < .05$, change in $R^2 = .03$). Subgroup correlational analyses indicate that the moderating effects are oppo-

site in direction to those predicted. That is, the negative relationship between stress and organizational commitment is stronger under high support than under low support.

Thus, this study provides no evidence that social support serves a helpful buffering role between stresses experienced by new employees and their subsequent adjustment. If such buffering effects actually existed, one would certainly expect to find them in this study. With established workers, social support may be merely a pleasant adjunct, or a satisfying job context variable, and hence perform little buffering. However, the newcomer must rely on the support of others for many things, such as basic information on how to do the job, encouragement through the frustrations inherent in learning new skills, and simple friendship and belongingness in an environment composed initially of complete strangers. Thus, social support should be extremely important to newcomers, and buffering effects should appear in this setting if they appear anywhere. That they did not appear seems particularly damning to the buffering hypothesis proposed in the stress literature.

Instead, it seems that social support has important main effects in reducing the level of perceived stress, and also in directly facilitating positive adjustment outcomes. Since some evidence of causality was presented for the support to adjustment link, it is possible to make a recommendation for individuals overseeing new employee socialization. Specifically, some form of support should be made available to new employees. Opportunities for substantial contact with the superior and/or more experienced peers should be provided. In addition, these insiders could be reminded of the difficult adjustment task facing newcomers, and of how they can be helpful. Whenever possible support should be provided by both co-workers and superiors. Finally, a third possible source of support would be other newcomers, in situations where multiple newcomers are socialized "collectively" (Van Maanen and Schein, 1979).

FOOTNOTES

1 This research was supported by a grant from the Office of Naval Research, N00014-18-K0036, NR170-925.

2 Difference scores are often criticized as being unreliable, yet these reliabilities are similar to the reliabilities of other measures used in this research, and to the reliability of the 9 expectations items (.85) and the 9 actual conditions items at three and six months (.80, .79).

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